



UNIT-9

Starting Your Own Wedding Planning Business

Learning Outcomes

- ✓ Information on Starting Your Own Wedding Consulting/Planning Business

Unit 9

Starting Your Own Wedding Planning Business

The first thing you must do when considering starting your own business is to write a business plan with a clear focus on your target audience. When the business plan has been completed, the next step is to determine strategies for marketing your business successfully. Once potential clients begin making contact, you will need to be able to conduct successful interviews, develop good communication skills, and familiarise yourself with contracts and how they work. Always remember that there is no client unless a contract has actually been signed.

The Business Plan and Your Target Audience

A business plan should define your business and clearly identify the goals you've set. It can also serve as your company resume. In your business plan you will need to include a current and pro-forma balance sheet, income statement, and cash flow analysis. This will help you allocate your resources correctly and will give you the ability to make good business decisions and handle any unforeseen complications. It will provide you with specific and organised information about your business and give you an idea of how to pay back any borrowed funds. You must have a comprehensive business plan if you intend to ask for a bank loan. A good business plan also informs suppliers, sales personnel and others about the operation of your business and your goals.

In this section we outline the basics of creating a solid business plan.

Writing the Business Plan

Developing your business plan is a crucial step as it shows people that you are serious about starting your business. If you can't find the time to create a game plan, how will you find or create time and energy to run your business? The business plan will also make sure you are taken seriously by lending institutions, colleagues, vendors, and competitors.

You must think carefully about these four core questions before you start writing your business plan:

- What product or service does your particular business provide and what needs does it fulfil?
- Who are the potential customers for your service or product and why should they purchase it from you?
- How will you reach potential customers?
- Where will you obtain the financial resources to start your business?

In short, the business plan you create will help you describe your business, choose your target market, manage the day-to-day operations, and handle your finances. There is no single formula for developing a

good business plan; however, there are certain elements which are common to most plans. The Table below summarises these common elements.

Begin with Section 1 and describe your business by providing a clear and concise mission statement. This is usually just a single sentence and it will be used as your statement of being. Start by writing: “The mission of (insert company name here) is . . .” and finish it by stating your philosophy and focus. A description with more detail can follow and this could include a short overview of your vision, services, products and goals.

As well as your business description, the first part of your business plan must also include a solid marketing plan, a clear method of operation, listings of personnel needs, and details of your competition. Wedding consultants often begin by working alone, and as their business grows they hire more staff.

Section II of the business plan will include financial data. Most consultants start off small and work from home, obviating the need to immediately apply for a loan. Once their business starts to grow and they build their reputations, they will need to hire staff and will require a larger space in which to work, which they will have to rent. Your list of capital equipment and supplies will detail the materials you’ll need to operate your business. Equipment might be permanent and reusable over a long period. This would include vehicles, computers, printers, filing cabinets, desks, bookshelves, and stationery items such as scissors, staplers and tape. Supplies tend to be items that are consumed repeatedly and require replenishment, such as printer/photocopier paper, cartridges, pens, staples and sticky notes. It is important to keep a spreadsheet detailing all the equipment and supplies you use in your daily operations.

TABLE 9.1

Business Plan Elements

Cover Sheet

Executive Summary/Purpose Statement

Table of Contents

Section I: The Business

- Business description
- Marketing
- Competition
- Operating procedures
- Personnel Processes
- Business insurance

- **Section II: Financial Data**
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- Capital equipment and supply lists
- Balance sheets
- Income statements
- Breakeven analysis
- Pro-forma income projections
- Pro-forma cash flow
- **Section III: Supporting Documents**
- Personal financial statement
- Tax returns
- Copy of lease
- Legal documentation and copies of license(s)
- Résumé

The final projections are vital to business success as they help to determine the pricing structure. The third section of the business plan should contain all the supporting documentation, including everything vital to securing loans as the business becomes larger. Leases, tax returns, personal financial statements, resume and licenses should all be easily available. It is not necessary to reinvent the wheel - just get your business plan down on paper. Many individuals and resources are available to assist you with this. There are numerous websites, pieces of software, books, and accountants who can help. Bplans.com is one such website which contains more than 50 business plans to review. One of them is specifically tailored to wedding consultancy businesses.

Beyond the Business Card

Some people believe that all it takes to get started as a wedding consultant/planner is a business card. This is wrong. You must first establish your business as a formal and legal entity before you can begin dealing with clients. Prospective clients will check your credentials before they hire you. If you do not have a legitimate business, clients will go elsewhere. Organising a wedding is a highly stressful process and clients will not want any additional hassles such as finding out too late that the person/company they hired to help with the biggest event of their lives does not have proper insurance or was not legally allowed to operate a business.

Business Name

You must ensure that you have a business name (preferably one that stands out). When deciding upon a name, conduct proper research and use your creative imagination. Make sure you investigate your competition. The name you choose should be unique – just like you. Your business name might be casual, contemporary, elegant or formal. Whatever you decide, make sure it reflects your particular style. Your business name should not be complicated or confusing in any way, nor should it be overly twee. A very complicated business name such as “Felicia’s Fancy and Fabulous Wedding Planning and Design” will not lend itself to a concise logo and will be too wordy for business cards. Keep it simple and

innovative. Clients tend to remember business names that are unique, simple and concise. Many wedding consultants/planners use their own names in their business titles, such as 'Susan Summers Wedding Consultancy' or 'Events by Chantelle.' This lends a more personal feel to the business name. Also consider starting your business name with 'A' as this will ensure that your company will be listed close to the top of directory listings.

Once you have come up with a few different possible ideas for a name, share them with family and close friends to obtain their feedback. Other people may give you reasons for using or avoiding a certain name. When you have received their feedback, cut your choices down to two or three and then down to one. Make sure that the name you have chosen is not already in use or does not sound very similar to another business name. Even if your chosen business name is not on a website, it may still be a business name; therefore, you must check carefully. When you have found a name you like and have verified that it is available, make sure you register that name immediately. If it is not available, move on to the second or third choice of names.

The Corporate Structure of Your Business

The next step is to determine your business structure. There are three main types of businesses: sole proprietor businesses, partnerships, and corporations. In between, there are many hybrids such as limited liability companies. The sole proprietor business type is the simplest and the most common one for wedding planners/consultants. It only needs one individual to operate this type of business. It is simple and the least expensive to set up. You must be careful since, should your business fail, your own personal assets could be used to pay off any business debts. This is because this type of business does not exist separately from its owner. You must therefore accept all financial risks.

The partnership type of business is a relationship which exists between two or more people who decide to work together in business or a trade. Should you choose to go down the partnership road, make sure you employ a lawyer to draw up a formal agreement. This ensures that all partners involved are aware of their rights and also of their responsibilities. Even if you are going into business with your best friend whom you've known for a long time, you cannot assume that he/she knows or understands his/her responsibilities. For this reason, to protect all parties involved, you must put everything in writing.

The other type of business, as mentioned above, is a corporation, which is a legal entity separate from the owner him/herself. You must file articles of incorporation, elect officers, hold annual meetings and pay corporate taxes. This type of business works well for those who decide to franchise their business.

Location of Business Operation

Many wedding consultants, especially in the beginning, operate out of their own homes. If you decide to do this, call the Zoning Commission in your local area to check any regulations that might govern this type of business activity. In some cases, home-based businesses may be prohibited from having clients attending the premises. You will need to check whether any special permits are required for your business. If it is the case that home-based businesses such as yours are not allowed, an alternative plan would be to meet clients at their homes or another mutually convenient location.

Licenses, Permits and Insurance

Business owners must normally hold a legal business license. You can obtain a form for this at your local city hall. The license usually covers a period of one year and the fee is minimal. Check local government websites for more information.

A permit from the local health department will also be necessary if you intend to provide food and beverages for clients. If, for example, you are asked by a client to make a hundred miniature cakes as favours, you must obtain a health permit. If you do not plan to do any catering for clients, this permit will not be necessary.

Insurance is another expense but it is essential if you are running your own business. You must make sure you have insurance to protect yourself against any potentially damaging situations. For example, many times a wedding planner will be asked to transport the wedding gifts from Point A to B. If one of those gifts goes missing or is damaged, you will at least be covered for the cost. If you are working at a venue and you accidentally break a vase, your insurance will cover the cost. Various insurance policies are available; therefore, check them carefully and select the one that suits your wedding consultancy business.

If you are working from home and have home insurance, you may already have a certain amount of liability insurance. Check the amount that your policy will cover. If it is quite low, you may need a 'rider' to the main policy. This is like an addendum to the main policy and it covers specific items such as computers and office equipment. Riders can be economical and provide you with some peace of mind. A rider only incurs a nominal fee charge. A general liability policy is advisable for people operating home-based businesses which do not have significant foot traffic. Should you decide to hire a staff member who will also work out of your home, you must take out business owners' insurance as well. This will ensure you are covered against any physical injuries to yourself, your employee(s) or your clients, any damage to property, or other situations which may arise. The business owners' insurance will be in addition to the homeowner's policy. It will be more expensive than a rider.

Establishing your business outside of your home will require you to obtain commercial business insurance. The fees for this will depend on the type of business, where it is located, and any state/local authority regulations. An insurance agent will be able to help you decide which coverage is right for you. You must be properly insured before your first client comes through your door.

Developing a Marketing Strategy

The term 'marketing' is used to refer to any of a company's activities that are associated with selling its service or product and creating a competitive advantage. Traditionally, marketing has been presented as the four Ps. These refer to product, price, place and promotion.

The product is both the tangible and intangible goods and services that a company offers. As the consultant, you are the liaison between a couple and the many tangible purchases they make. You also provide intangible elements such as organisation and design. Price refers to the exchange value of a

product or, in other words, your fee structure. The place refers to the area or radius in which you operate, any distance you must travel as the consultant, and the main communities that you serve. Promotion refers to advertising, publicity, sponsorship, sales promotions, and personal sales you utilise to develop your business.

When thinking about marketing, most people only consider advertising and making a sale. Marketing is also about all the other little things that the company does to reach target audiences. These would include driving to clients' homes to make deliveries, throwing an annual party to thank your clients, or sending out cards to vendors. When businesses match their products and services to people who need them, their marketing is likely to be successful. This section highlights three key factors that will allow you to develop an effective marketing strategy for your type of business. You must first determine your target audience, develop marketing tools, and learn the four secrets of selling to brides.

Determining your Target Audience

Once your business has been established as a formal entity, you will need to get the word out that you are here and open for business. Marketing is the way to do this. Firstly, determine your target market. This is a well-defined group of people you want to serve. Many new business owners find it quite daunting to establish and define their own style. You will have to find yours. Some new consultants find themselves struggling because they do not turn anyone away, not wishing to lose any business. They then find themselves becoming everything to everyone and, of course, this is not possible. This approach means they cannot focus their energies on a specific target audience. The following questions may help you become more focused:

- Who will your customers be?
- Is this a growing market in your area?
- How will you reach your market/customers?
- What pricing strategy will you employ?
- What will be your special area of expertise?
- How will you differentiate your business from competitors?

Marketing Tool Development

For new businesses, the best marketing tools are a business card and a good website. Before you begin developing either of these tools, however, you must consider developing a specific logo for your business. Consider McDonald's and their 'golden arches'. Think of Nike and their famous 'swoosh'. Think of Starbucks and their mermaid. These businesses are known as much by their graphic representations, known as their logos, as by their business names. You have spent a lot of time choosing your business name; now you must work on a logo which will capture your essence in graphics. Once you've created your logo, you can then move on to developing your means of marketing.

This is a very important task and it is advisable to seek professional assistance from a graphic artist or designer. For those with limited funds, there are many internet-based logo design firms that are

reasonably priced. You might also try securing the assistance of any friends with artistic talents, or perhaps consider hiring a graphic design or art student to give you ideas. Meet in person with the chosen designer and describe your business, your style, your mission statement, your philosophy, and the type of client you wish to attract. Give your artist some initial ideas and then allow him/her free rein to create designs for you to review. When the options are presented to you, take some time and think about them. Questions to ask yourself would include: Which idea will carry me through many years? Which idea has the most flexibility? Which idea really personifies what I am all about? Keep in mind that the logo you choose will be on all your letterheads, signage, brochures, work shirts, and your website. Ensure the logo you choose looks like a wedding consultancy business and not a florist, a caterer, or any other wedding-related specialist. Once you have your logo, you can begin developing other key marketing devices.

Business Cards

Some people may consider business cards antiquated, but in fact they are some of the best marketing tools you can have. They are also one of the most inexpensive. Elaborate or plain, professionally designed or hand-made, your business cards are an indispensable marketing tool. They are tangible personifications of your business; hence, the card style should echo your business style. If, for example, your business plan is to cater for people with smaller budgets, your business cards must reflect that. Conversely, if your aim is to become involved in high-end weddings, your cards should be printed on expensive paper and all lettering should be engraved. Targeting recent university graduates? Make sure your cards are modern in order to appeal to younger audiences. If you're targeting a certain market, make sure your business cards reflect that.

Business cards must include the following information: your logo, your business name, your personal name and title, and your contact information which would include a mailing address, a home telephone number, a mobile number, an e-mail address, a fax number, and a website address. If your business offers a particular speciality, it might be advisable to state this aspect on the card, but make sure you keep it brief. "Specialising in multi-cultural celebrations" or "Fluent in English, French and Spanish" would provide concise and valuable information to your potential clients. Print around 500 cards and make sure you *always* have some with you. Perhaps invest in a stylish metal or leather cardholder. This will keep the cards clean and fresh, and old-looking cards won't be tumbling out of your bag when you need to give them to people. Remember that your business cards represent your business.

Websites

Your business cards are like a mini-billboard for your business. If you want an electronic billboard, acquire a professional website as this would be capable of reaching thousands of potential clients.

- The Web is a communication vehicle that is inexpensive, proven and capable of reaching a mass market. Here you will discuss in more detail your corporate objectives and provide a clear description of your products and services.
- Websites are easy to regularly update and easy to keep fresh, unlike print marketing.
- A good website is an excellent vehicle for creating a 24-hour multimedia portfolio (pictures, sounds, videos) to stimulate sales.

- Website email forms also allow a passive (hands-off) means of gathering new leads and garnering more customer interest.
- You can create newsletters in web form or email, which is a very inexpensive way of sending promotional material.

Make sure you link your email address to your website address. If a wedding website is (for example) wonderfulweddings.com, an associate might have the email address leanna@wonderfulweddings.com. This will be easier to remember, more professional, and also more marketable than a regular email address.

Marketing Appeals

When creating your new website and other marketing materials, aim to appeal to your potential clientele through emotion, credibility and logic.

The emotional aspect will draw clients' attention even closer to your services. Many consultants include photos from weddings they have worked on. This personalises the website. Potential clients will be able to gain a sense of your particular style and your specialities through a visual representation of your work. If, for example, your particular business caters for ski resort wedding events, make sure this is obvious through a series of pictures. Brides in particular love looking at others' wedding pictures. It creates a sense of excitement and anticipation for their special day. One thing to remember when using photos on your website is to obtain copyright permission from the photographers. Most of the time, wedding consultants and photographers have excellent relationships.

You might showcase your credibility with quotes from past clients' letters or emails. If you have received any other recognition or awards related to wedding consultancy, be sure to display these on the website as well. Your credibility will be enhanced through any related seminars, courses or conferences you have attended or participated in as a speaker, for example. If you have had any involvement with wedding associations such as the Association of Bridal Consultants or the International Special Events Society, include this as well. You can also advertise on other websites such as The Knot. There will be a charge for listing your business on these sites.

As for logic, this is a matter of answering all the nuts-and-bolts type of questions that clients may have. These would include who, what, when, where and why, as well as cost and contact information. To be more specific: the people attached to your company (who), a service description, i.e. what is provided (what), the length of time you've been doing this job (when), the business location and/or areas you serve (where), and your mission statement (why). If you are quite new to the wedding planning business, it's probably best to avoid directly stating the length of time you've been working (the when). As time goes by, however, this information will significantly add to your credibility. For example, you might say "During the past six years we have planned over 100 weddings" rather than "We opened our doors two months ago."

You may decide not to state your cost structure on your website. If this is the case, you might allude to cost by describing some of the packages your business offers. Any clients requiring further details will use the contact information on the website.

The Four Secrets of Selling to Brides

SECRET # 1

Secret # 1 Make a connection with prospective brides. This simply means creating an awareness of your business in the bride's mind; in other words, she must be able to find you. More traditional media options such as Yellow Pages, radio stations or newspapers can often be costly. These types of advertising allow you to reach quite a large audience of people and will therefore be expensive. However, you must remember that you only want to reach 1 or 2% who are actually planning a wedding. Advertising your business in wedding-specific media will be a lot more effective. Another cost-effective way of advertising is direct marketing by mail because you are placing your particular message in a bride's hands. Obtaining lists of brides from an exhibit package at a bridal show can be done as part of an advertising program with a website, or through a list broker.

Another way of connecting with a bride is through referrals. You can ask her for referrals during the wedding planning and also after the wedding. Almost every bride will know another woman who may be planning a wedding. Referrals are a very good way of acquiring more business. Networking with other people in wedding-type businesses is another way of securing referrals. When you start out, make an appointment with every major wedding vendor in your area. They will thus get to know you. Joining the main associations and socialising with others in the wedding business is also a good idea. Establishing friendships with other wedding consultants will probably bring you business referrals if they are booked at a particular time or if they come across someone who matches your specific niche.

As you create your website, remember that it will only succeed if the message is sufficiently compelling and brides are able to find it easily. Search engines use certain criteria when ranking sites and one of them concerns how many other sites are linked to a particular website. Try to cross-link your site with others that are wedding-related. This will have more of an impact. Be careful, however, to avoid giving away any of your trade secrets on your website. Brides pay for your knowledge, your contacts and your experience. Do not give away too much information free of charge. You are actually selling an extremely personalised service which will be most effective when you have the opportunity to personally meet with a bride. Your website is intended only to give enough information to entice brides to call you for more details.

Finally, bridal shows can also connect you with brides. Bridal shows will typically include a fashion show, demonstrations, and many different wedding-related businesses arranged in a trade-show format. These shows give vendors an opportunity to reach a lot of prospective customers in a few hours. They also allow brides to attend one location and see all the options available for their weddings.

You must constantly market your company. Your business type relies not on repeat business but mainly on first-time clients. Newly engaged women are constantly entering the marketplace as prospective

customers; however, they exit the marketplace once they are married. Your marketing investment for your business is as important as the investment you make in the tools of your trade.

SECRET # 2

Secret #2 Make sure you reach the brides at the right time. Your marketing will be effective only if your timing is perfect. Junk mail is merely junk and spam is just spam if the message is not relevant to the person reading it. Convincing brides that you are the person they need at the precise time when they really *do* need your services is the biggest challenge you will face as a wedding consultant/planner.

If you are offering full-service planning, your aim should be to reach brides shortly after they have become engaged. Providing day-of co-ordinating services will allow you to reach brides who haven't hired a long-term consultant/planner and will also bring you valuable experience. The best time for the marketing of day-of services is around three to four months before a wedding.

SECRET #3

Secret #3 Secure credibility with brides. The more frequently you are able to get your message across to brides, the more opportunities you will have to gain their trust. Suppose a bride meets you at a bridal show or through a friend. She may later see your ad in a bridal magazine and receive an email from you directing her to your site. Then another company refers her to you. This will be very positive.

It will be necessary to focus on how a bride will benefit from your business rather than just the features of the business. This will increase your credibility. Features include your years of experience, your highly trained staff (which may just be you), and personalised attention. These are important but only when combined with other corresponding benefits. Let's say, for example, that one of your features is "unrivalled customer service." You might then describe the benefit as follows: "you can relax and enjoy your special day." A bride is really 'buying' you in essence more than anything else. A bride will only do business with you *after* she 'buys' you. If a bride likes you, she will probably like doing business with you. Being comfortable with you as a person will lead to her being comfortable doing business with you. Be someone she knows will not take advantage of her. Become a trustworthy ally.

SECRET # 4

Secret #4 Give a bride what she wants. Brides have many details to take care of and usually limited time to do so. She has needs and problems. Don't get too wrapped up in the splendours of your products or services. You must concentrate on how to effectively fulfil a bride's needs and solve her problems. The sales process for a wedding planner is all about the bride. It is not about you. The bride doesn't really care about your business. Her concerns are all about her wedding. Your job is to make it as easy as possible for her to do business with you. Make sure that you are accessible, that you answer your phone in a professional manner, and that you return all calls promptly. If your business etiquette impresses your clients, they will do business with you *and* refer you to friends and acquaintances.

Client Interviews, Communication, and the Contracts

Attracting your very first client is probably one of the most difficult parts of starting a wedding planning business. Persuading the initial bride to sign your contract may seem like a huge task; however, with good marketing, planning and creative thinking, you will succeed. Below we discuss certain elements which will help you secure clients, including the initial screening, the client interview details, all follow-up communications, the contracts, and compensation.

Initial Screening

Putting effort into your marketing will eventually lead to an email or phone call from a likely client requesting a meeting. The bride will usually be the main point of contact. Before grabbing your briefcase and rushing out of the door, you should have a brief conversation on the phone first. During this conversation, you will be able to screen the potential client by asking a few initial questions such as: *When is the wedding date? What is your wedding budget? Where will your wedding and reception take place?* The answers will allow you to check your calendar quickly and make sure you don't have another wedding scheduled for that day. They will also allow you to determine whether the client has an unrealistic budget, thus allowing you to judge whether this particular wedding will be worth your effort and time. It will also allow you to verify that the wedding ceremony and reception will take place in a location where your profits won't be eaten up in petrol costs. If the venues are quite far away, you will have to make sure the additional transport costs and travel time are built into your fees.

Once the initial screening on the phone has been conducted, arrange a face-to-face meeting with your prospective client. This might take place at a number of different locations such as the bride's home, your home office, or the reception venue. Strive to make the appointment as convenient as possible. Should you decide to meet your prospective client in a public area, ensure that the chosen environment is conducive to conversation. It will not be effective if you have to compete with baristas making lattes in the background or, even worse, find yourself having to leave the premises because they are closing.

During the screening process you must set some ground rules regarding who might accompany the bride to the client interview. Her groom's presence would be acceptable, but a mother, father, or a sister with a newborn baby will be too much. Having a bridal entourage participate in this meeting will actually hamper the process. Remember, this will be your opportunity to hear what this potential client actually wants and as such it's an opportunity to sell yourself and your business. If competing messages or agendas are brought to the meeting, you won't be able to obtain the information you need.

Client Interview Details

Imagine the client interview almost as a "first date" or a "getting to know you" type of meeting. If you specialise in outdoor or country weddings, brides who visualise their weddings in chic hotel ballrooms will not be the best clients for you and your business. If you glean this information during your interview, it will save everyone's time and money if you gently steer the bride toward a more appropriate planner. Client interviews are an opportunity to discover exactly what the bride expects and wants for her wedding day.

Client Interview Questions

- How did you and your fiancé meet?
- Where are you planning to go for your honeymoon?
- What hobbies and interests do you have?
- What colours appeal to you the most?
- What type of music do you like?
- Where did you grow up?
- Where are your favourite places to travel?
- What is your cultural background, and do you want to incorporate some aspects of it into the ceremony or reception?

Special Customs or Traditions for the Wedding Day?

- How many guests are you expecting?
- What tasks have you already completed for your wedding?
- What are the “must haves” for your wedding day?
- How would you describe your personal style?
- What is your budget?
- Where do you like to shop?
- What expectations do you have of your wedding consultant or wedding planner?
- What do you fear the most on your wedding day?
- Do you have any special needs or requests?
- Is there anything that I have not asked you that perhaps I should?

Many women have been dreaming about their wedding days all their lives; hence, you now have a responsibility to make those dreams a reality. Make sure you dress appropriately when you meet with your prospective clients. Always be neat and professional-looking and convey a sense of being well organised. No bride wants a rag-tag planner who forgets business cards or arrives late for the very first meeting. When you sit with your client, allow her to do 75% of the talking. Listen very carefully to your client, ask the right questions that will encourage her to offer more details, and always maintain eye contact. The aim of this conversation is to gain as much information as possible about your potential client and her wishes for her special day.

Once the client has given you the details, you can then tell her about your experience and background, especially as it relates to her wedding. If you have just started out and have only a little experience, mention events you have assisted with, any classes or courses you’ve taken, or any ideas you might have for her wedding day. This is a chance to make the sale and to convince the bride that she needs to hire you to help her plan her wedding.

Follow-up Communication

Immediately after your initial meeting, send a further communication that reinforces what you learnt at your meeting and offers information highlighting reasons why this client should hire you. Brides often interview three to five consultants before choosing one they like the best. Your follow-up

communication may be just what is required to set you above other planners. You might simply send a thank-you note or perhaps write a thorough recap of your meeting, attaching a wedding planning contract. Whatever you choose to do, make sure your communication is flawless. Invest in elegant, personal letterheads or stationery if sending thank-you notes. All communication that leaves your work place is a reflection of you. Take the time to reread for spelling mistakes or typos, any misused words, and factual errors.

Contracts

There will be times when a client will be ready to commit to hiring you during or after your initial meeting. If this occurs, immediately follow up with a contract. This will be a written set of obligations that indicate clearly the responsibilities of both the client and the consultant/planner. You can send it by post or email. Whichever one you choose, make sure you have a standard version which can be customised quickly and sent out without delay. Do not delay sending out this contract as your client may secure another consultant if she doesn't hear from you immediately.

The contract should be sent out with a cover letter thanking the client for choosing you to plan her wedding and also assuring her that you are very excited about working with her on this special event. There is no standard contract for all planners but the following elements must be included in all contracts:

- Today's date
- The wedding date and time
- The rehearsal date and the time
- Names of the bride and groom
- Contact information for both bride and groom including addresses, all phone numbers, and email addresses
- Conditions, including roles and restrictions
- Your compensation which should include total fees, initial deposit, and payment schedules
- Terms, including liability and other legal issues
- A list of your duties
- A *Force Majeure* clause, which is there to protect you from natural disasters or other "Acts of God"
- Signatures of all parties and the associated dates

Please remember that ***you do not have a client unless you have a signed contract***. Unless the contract has been signed do not start working for that client. Without a signed contract, you only have a potential client. It is suggested that you show your contract to a lawyer if you intend to prepare it yourself. You might also show it to a mentor or a small-business advisor.

Compensation

When you began writing your business plan, you probably thought about setting the fees for your business. Begin by determining what other consultants in your area are charging. Once you know what the market will bear in your particular area, you can set your fees. If you are a new consultant with little

or no experience, do not expect to charge as much as an experienced consultant. Start out small and increase your fees gradually as your reputation grows. You can charge for your services in various ways. These would include an hourly rate, a flat fee, a package deal, a certain percentage of the wedding budget, or a day-of fee. Each one of these options has both pros and cons. You must work out which fee structure type will best suit you.

It matters not which approach you take, but don't expect to support yourself full-time from the beginning. Most wedding consultants start out as part-timers and build their businesses gradually.

A flat fee is a good option for clients who want you to manage their weddings from start to finish. With this type of fee there is no need to keep track of billable hours, and you know exactly how much you'll earn based on the set price.

Hourly rates work well if your clients only want a few things from a consultant. For example, a client may want you to provide her with a list of venues that have a piano or perhaps recommend a few florists who offer both silk and living flowers. Sometimes clients hire a consultant on an hourly basis but then realise they need the planner for a lot more tasks than originally anticipated. When you have your meeting with a client, try to determine her exact needs. Only then can you suggest an appropriate compensation package.

Wedding planners/consultants often have clever names for their package deals and use names such as gold, silver and bronze, or diamond, emerald and sapphire. With every title include a clearly defined list of services, where fees increase with the increasing number of duties. Some consultants charge a percentage fee of the overall wedding budget, which is usually around 10%; this is a simple and very effective way of charging for services. If your experience is limited, however, it is best to avoid this particular charging method. When you first start out you will probably have weddings with more modest budgets. If you charge a percentage of a modest budget, the fee you receive will probably be quite small.

One final point to consider is that many consultants/planners, especially those who are new to the business, will take on day-of weddings. This means agreeing to do only a small amount of work before the wedding day and usually involves confirming the vendors; on the wedding day itself, you will be on hand to ensure all the bride's plans are carried out. This service type will incur a day-of fee.

While more seasoned planners also specialise in day-of services, new planners will find this kind of work a good way of breaking into the wedding planning industry. Even if you are only hired for the day-of duties, this does not free you from the responsibility of producing a trouble-free wedding. "It wasn't me who hired the DJ" is not an excuse when you are faced with a microphone-hogging bore dressed in a tux and belting out commands rudely. You will still have to intervene when necessary and make sure the wedding is wonderful even if it wasn't you who planned it. Take the appropriate time and get to know as much as you can about the venues, the vendors, and the VIPs for each day-of wedding you are responsible for.

Whether you have been hired to plan the entire wedding or hired only to manage the day-of duties, you are the one responsible for meeting your client's expectations. Remember, a wedding of impressed clients and guests can often lead to more work in the future.

Vendor Relations, Networking and Negotiation

One of the most effective and least expensive marketing strategies you can use is to go out and personally meet your fellow wedding vendors. This is a valuable exercise and it will pay dividends for your business for many years to come. You will soon learn that wedding professionals are a close-knit community. The stationers know all the calligraphers, the caterers know the rental companies, and so on. Ideally, all of those vendors will one day know you. The following few pages will highlight the importance of establishing vendor relationships, how to properly network, and how to engage in effective negotiations.

Establish Vendor Relationships

Introduce yourself to as many other wedding vendors as possible because they will become vital as a source of referrals for your business. For example, Angela Davis has just become engaged. She rushes out with her mother to find the ideal wedding dress. They make an appointment at an exclusive boutique and begin their search. During this process Angela becomes quite overwhelmed and the assistant hears her say, “If choosing the wedding dress is this hard, how am I going to handle the rest?”

The assistant at the boutique might casually ask Angela if she’s thought about hiring a wedding planner to help her and ensure a beautiful and stress-free wedding day. Angela’s mother might perhaps mention that they haven’t thought about this because Angela only got engaged a week ago. Her interest might be piqued, however, and Angela’s mother might ask the assistant for wedding planner recommendations. It is at this point that your cultivation of a sterling reputation with other vendors will really pay off. The assistant may mention your name. Wedding vendors get to know each other by working for the same clients at the same events. They will begin to develop a sense of camaraderie and quickly discover who is reliable and who is not.

Over time, they start to trust one another and develop a sense of enthusiasm and morale-building for the entire team working on a wedding. Usually, a couple begin their wedding planning process by securing just one or two elements for their wedding. As they continue planning on their own they may decide it is very difficult and time-consuming and conclude that hiring a planner is a good idea. If the local country club events manager has a high regard for you and your work, he or she may refer a new client to you. If you have perhaps successfully guided other brides down the aisle of a specific church, the altar guild would be likely to recommend your services.

You never know where your next referral might come from. This is why it is very important to go out and meet lots of people in the same business. Start thinking beyond the usual vendors and talk to local travel agents, make-up artists, or ballroom dance teachers. Make sure you also introduce yourself to every local wedding consultant in your market. Other planners can actually be an incredible source of leads.

Let’s use four hypothetical planners — Susan, David, Holly and Greg — to illustrate how many benefits might result from working with other consultants. Let’s say that Susan is a long-established planner in your market. When she receives a phone call from a bride with only a small budget, she decides not to take that job. Susan might then be very happy to pass on your name and number to that bride. In this way she has assisted both the bride and you.

Another planner, David, might get a call for day-of help. He does not offer this service; therefore, he passes on your name and number if he knows that you do offer day-of assistance. If another consultant, Holly, is already committed on a certain date, she may refer a bride to you if your calendar is free. Let's say a bride is looking for a particular style or speciality such as knowledge of Asian wedding customs. That's when Greg, who knows you have expertise in this area, might give the bride your contact information. Do you see how it works? Cultivate friendships with other wedding planners because this is an excellent way of expanding your business.

Make a List

Once you identified other wedding vendors in your area, you should compile a list of specific individuals you would like to meet. This list might be created from many different sources. You might like to check:

- The Yellow Pages
- Local vendors listed on The Knot
- Vendors close to your home base
- A "best" list, often compiled in regional magazines
- Vendors who specialise in the same things you specialise in (e.g. Indian weddings)
- Vendors by category - for example, you might wish to meet all florists
- A list of vendor names in a bridal show program or local wedding publication

When you have your list of names, aim to meet a certain number of those vendors every week. Depending on your time commitments, you might meet up to five new vendors per week. Meeting all the players in your area will set you up as a player, too. You should start by calling each vendor and arranging a brief (approx 15 minute) appointment to introduce yourself. By calling in advance to make an appointment, you will be showing your respect for the other vendors' time and will also be conveying a professional image. Don't just drop in on a vendor unannounced. It is best to make appointments for early in the week as most vendors tend to become busier later in the week. Also remember the busiest wedding months - May, June, September and October. It would be advisable to schedule your appointments during January, February and August as these are considered the quieter months.

Once you have an appointment, work out what you will say in advance. Familiarise yourself with the vendors' websites. Read about their products and services. This will be of help to you during your meetings. If, for example, you are about to meet with a local florist, make a note of any recognition or recent awards he/she/they have received. Apart from doing proper research on the vendor, you might also rehearse what you want to convey about your own business. If you have a completed business plan as discussed earlier, you will be well prepared to answer any questions with confidence.

A final point to consider: what can you do for the vendor? Vendors will remember you if you have a unique speciality, a shared interest, a helpful skill, or if you are able to cross-market their goods and services with a link to their businesses on your business website. When you go even a little out of your way for another vendor, you will increase the likelihood of that vendor returning the favour.

Sharp and Centred

When meeting with the vendors, dress the same as you would when meeting clients. Look neat, tidy and professional. Do not come in looking rumpled or wrinkled. Remember, you are representing your own business and first impressions will last. Remember to bring extra business cards to meetings in case the vendors ask to keep a few to share with clients.

It is also advisable to give the vendor you are meeting your full attention. Focus your energy on the vendor during the meeting. Make sure your mobile phone and other devices, such as a pager, are turned off. Do not allow yourself to feel flustered if a vendor does not extend a similar courtesy to you and if the meeting is sometimes disturbed by phones ringing, staff asking questions, or clients requiring the vendor's attention. You are on their time at that moment, and patience is a necessary virtue for wedding consultants. Sometimes, a vendor may not really be willing to take time out to meet with you. He/she may not be welcoming or helpful during your interaction. Do not take this personally. That particular vendor probably treats everyone the same way. In the majority of cases, however, you will find that wedding vendors are quite friendly, generous with their time, and eager to meet with consultants.

Networking

Networking: **“The Relationship of Entrepreneurs and Their Small Businesses With the Outside World.”**

The best way to begin your networking program is to join organisations where those involved in the wedding business gather. A very popular networking group for wedding planners is ISES, or the International Special Events Society. This group has chapters in most major markets. It offers a broad range of services, such as professional and educational development, professional resources, discounted business services, listings for all members on their website and subscriptions to Special Events magazine. It is advantageous to join ISES if you are still a student because the annual student membership fees are only £35. Fees for professionals are £450. The membership fee for professionals is tax-deductible as a business expense; hence, joining this group becomes a win-win proposition once you start your business.

ISES holds meetings every month at various venues. Vendors who are associated with the society will supply the catering, linens, floral arrangements, invitations, entertainment and other elements as a way of showcasing their businesses. Frequenting these gatherings is actually a great way to meet other wedding consultants and vendors. Just remember that networking will take time and you'll get out of it only what you put into it. Many people join associations but then feel frustrated or give up after only one or two meetings because they think they are not meeting the right people or they feel left out because everyone already appears to have their own set social group. You must remember that, in most cases, those relationships took years to cultivate, and you will also form such relationships over time.

There are other groups you should consider, such as the Association of Certified Professional Wedding Consultants, the Association of Bridal Consultants, and the International Festival and Events Association. Like ISES, these groups encourage on-going education and training, and professional development. They host conferences and meetings that will allow you to connect with other people with similar interests and goals. You should also familiarise yourself with business-related groups in your area. Your local Chamber of Commerce would be one such group. The Chamber holds monthly meetings where leaders

can introduce new members and initiate conversations about issues facing the business community as a whole.

Other networking groups that may offer you opportunities to meet interesting people potentially in need of wedding consultants include the Young Democrats/Republicans (in the U.S), the Junior League, Toastmasters, “Friends of” or the event planning arm of any major museum or art gallery, and the alumni association of your college or university. All these groups are excellent resources for community networking.

Negotiation

The ability to negotiate is a very valuable skill that you will definitely need. You will often be faced with situations where you will have to think on your feet, from a bride who wants a fee discount from you to a vendor who wants to charge your client a premium just for delivering the ice cream in August. Your time will be spent honing your negotiating skills. For example, perhaps one of your clients has ordered apple green linens for their wedding but the rental company has delivered green linens which are a shade different from what your client ordered. It will be up to you to negotiate with the rental vendor and secure the exact type of linens in time for your client’s wedding. Alternatively, perhaps you are attending a meeting with your clients and the wedding reception venue manager. During this meeting you learn that the clients want the “cherry drop ice” for their signature drinkable dessert which the venue usually offers. The director of catering for the venue tells you this speciality drink isn’t available in the month when your clients will be getting married due to fresh cherries being extremely expensive at that time. It will be your job to negotiate with the venue to ensure that your clients get what they want for their special day.

How Do You Negotiate?

Money Magazine’s Michael Kaplan states that there are seven rules for getting what you want on your terms. They are all applied below to the wedding consulting business.

1. Do not look at a deal as an ‘either/or’ proposal. Good negotiating is about compromise. Give a little and get a little. To get the cherry drop ice mentioned earlier, your clients may have to forego one of the expensive hors d’oeuvres as a way offsetting the cost of procuring their of out-of-season cherries.
2. Know what you can part with—then part with it hard. Prioritise what you really want as a result of the negotiations. Don’t lay your cards on the table but be clear in your mind what will satisfy you about the outcome of the deal. If you know your client is not particularly concerned about the exact linen colour and the vendor offers a discount to spare an extra trip to the warehouse, letting go is an easy decision.
3. Work out the other side’s timetable and use it. Perhaps the gown shop is anxious to bring in next season’s gowns but hasn’t yet discounted the one that your bride loves. Suggest a reasonable discount and begin negotiating the price. Dresses become outdated rather quickly. Use this knowledge to your advantage.
4. Show people that you understand their position.

5. Here, the skill of empathy comes in handy. You have to convince the distressed mother from the Consultant in Action case that you empathise with what she's going through. You don't have to agree with her but let her express her feelings and thoughts. Ask open-ended questions to obtain more information and to validate her feelings. The stationery vendor will surely notice how you balanced the bride and her mother's emotions in a calm and reassuring manner.
6. Restrain your emotions. Keep to the point and leave personalities out of it. Do not burn any bridges with clients or vendors. You don't have to like a particular vendor or a particular client in order to have a successful working relationship with them.
7. Do not believe everything, but on no account call anyone a liar. Negotiations are actually a strategy. Both sides know that the other is trying to gain the upper hand. Let's say a local florist insists she cannot do any better on the price for centrepieces. You might say that you accept that, but let her know that your clients will need to re-evaluate their options for a floral designer.
8. Have a backup plan. Before entering into negotiations, think carefully through all your options. If a client wants a particular ballroom for the reception but you find out that it isn't available, present her with a few other options she may not have considered. Keep at least another three venue options in mind, or encourage the client to consider changing the date of the wedding if you are at a sufficiently early stage in the planning process.

Whether you are just starting to develop skills that will create positive vendor relationships or you want to hone what you've already learned, networking and negotiation skills are very valuable and worth cultivating. As with any complex interpersonal skill, your proficiency in networking and negotiation will develop over time.

Office Management

If you are just starting out as a wedding consultant, it is crucial that you lay a solid foundation for your business by making good business decisions right from the start. Whether you work from home or lease office space, there are many facets to good office management, including organising your work environment, selecting hardware and software, gathering other business equipment essentials, and building a staff. These office management essentials are the building blocks of a successful wedding consultancy business.

Work Environment Organisation

If you are planning to work from home, start by checking the furniture you currently have and see what might work in a home office. A solid desk which has good working space will be the most important item. It should have enough room for a computer, and space for reviewing guest lists, spreadsheets, and sample books. Remember that you will also need space for a scanner, printer, a fax machine (perhaps), and other equipment. They should all be located close to your desk.

One of the most difficult tasks you will have as a wedding consultant is to keep track of all the details which go into planning a wedding. How you decide to manage the information will be up to you; however, options would include three-ring notebooks, spreadsheets, a day timer, 3 x 5 cards, or a file folder system. Filing cabinets, storage bins and bookshelves are very helpful as they use vertical space

and hide clutter. Invest in a chair that is comfortable, fits your body and offers good support. There are many ergonomic styles to choose from and they are readily available at local office stores. Measure the desk height to ensure your chair will comfortably fit underneath the desk while you're sitting in it.

As a planner/consultant, you will appreciate the value of good lighting for weddings. The same applies to your office. Check your office area lighting. If the overhead lighting is inadequate, buy a floor lamp or desk lamp that will allow you to work efficiently at any hour. If you do not have everything you need to set up your home office, buying equipment doesn't need to be an expensive process. You can also attend garage sales or thrift shops where you might find affordable furniture or equipment.

As well as finding your office style, consider setting yourself some ground rules. For example, have a work schedule which fits in with your body's time clock and lets you work a reasonable number of hours every day. If you are a 'morning person' it makes sense to start your working day at 5:00 A.M. If you manage better later on in the day, consider starting later, perhaps in the afternoon. Remember, you are your own boss, and you set your own hours for maximum profit and productivity. You may want to limit the time spent surfing the Internet or making personal phone calls; you might also consider taking a break every hour or two, not eating in your office, having lunch at the same time each day, or any other policies that will help you work more effectively. Rules exist in every office and your home office is no exception.

It is important to note one thing: working from home can be lonely, especially when you are beginning to build your business. To avoid 'climbing the walls', make appointments to meet with vendors, as discussed earlier, while building your own client base. If you are at home with no opportunities to interact with the world, you will risk isolation, boredom and depression. Balancing your outside meetings with quiet work time at home will help you feel more energised and productive.

If you realise that working from home isn't for you, you can always lease an office space. You can find information on office space leasing by browsing real estate ads online or national websites such as www.offices2share.com. You might lease office space on a month-to-month basis or only for special client meetings. Many executive suites are located in business parks; they include furnishings, are internet-ready, and have certain optional add-ons such as receptionist services, mail pick-up, and conference space access. Whether you prefer day-to-day office space or space once in a while, leasing a well-equipped space is much easier than you think.

Selecting Software and Hardware

You will be spending quite a lot of time on the road; therefore, seriously consider buying a laptop computer instead of a desktop system. Besides having all your files on hand, a laptop will allow you to give visual presentations such as showing photos of recent weddings to prospective clients. It doesn't matter which system you choose, but make sure your computer has plenty of storage space, enough memory to run numerous programs at once, and a reasonably fast processor. For graphics work, including any photographic images, animation or illustrations, you will have to maximise the processor speed, the hard drive storage space, and the memory (Obringer, 2006).

Once you have bought the hardware you need, you will also have to purchase software applications. As a minimum, you will need software for the following functions: word processing, e-mail, presentations, computer maintenance, spreadsheets, virus protection, Portable Document Format (PDF) reading, a tool for graphics and image editing, and internet browsers. In some cases, software can be downloaded free online, but business software usually comes in packages such as Microsoft Office (Obringer, 2006). You will need a high-speed internet provider because so much of your work requires internet access. You will also have to invest in spam and virus protection. Constant pop-ups and dial-up internet can paralyse your computer.

Other Business Equipment Essentials

As a wedding planner it is vital that you have a reliable vehicle. You do not want your vehicle to break down on your way to a job. If you cannot afford a premium vehicle because you have just started out, buy or even lease the most reliable one you can afford. On a cold and rainy evening at midnight, you will be very thankful that your car starts and gets you home safely after an all-day wedding. Both the interior and exterior of your vehicle should be well maintained and clean. Your car's appearance is another reflection of you and your business. Another essential element is a smart business wardrobe. It should include professional casual wear for set-ups, suits for client meetings, and elegant but functional formal attire for actual wedding days. Your clothing should be as impressive as you can afford, even if it is only one good suit. Every time you wear your suit, ensure that it is clean and ironed. You should project the image of a cool, calm, professional wedding planner, not someone who has slept in his or her clothes. Never look out of place or draw unnecessary attention to yourself during a wedding. Think carefully about your work wardrobe in advance and add any appropriate pieces as necessary.

There will be no time to shop for a suitable outfit the day before a wedding. You must be ready before your first client signs the contract. Without a doubt, a good-quality and comfortable pair of shoes is the most important wardrobe purchase you will make. It is vital to your safety and comfort that you have a pair of sensible, good-looking, non-slip shoes. As a consultant/planner, you will probably be on your feet for long periods of time.

Another important thing to consider, when picking out your shoes, is that wedding planners often walk through kitchens to communicate with catering staff. There you will encounter wet and slippery floors. If the shoes you are wearing have slick soles, you may easily slip and fall, even injuring yourself. If you are not fond of wearing practical shoes, remember that wedding planners will often wear dress shoes at the beginning of a wedding but change into sensible shoes after the wedding starts. No matter what you decide, always go for safety over fashion.

Building Your Staff

Even when starting out with a very tight budget of your own, you should still consider having a small staff. This could simply comprise a volunteer assistant for day-of implementation support. Assistants can manage ceremony activities, thus allowing you to oversee the reception details. If you are working on a large wedding, you may need two (or even more) assistants to ensure everything runs smoothly. Assistants are able to complete such tasks as directing vendors for set-up, gathering bridal parties for

photographs, or rushing to complete any last-minute errands. With a little guidance, an assistant can do almost anything to help you manage a wedding.

Finding qualified assistants can be a challenge. Many people will definitely be interested in learning the ropes as your assistant, but not all of them will have the necessary skills to succeed. Interview candidates and determine who has the most enthusiasm and/or experience for the position. Students from local universities or colleges are usually willing to volunteer their time for day-of operations to gain some experience. If they happen to be studying a related area (business or events management, for example), they may even want to work with you over a longer time period for a course credit in association with a practicum or internship experience. Check the details with the internship co-ordinator of the program to clarify any restrictions and requirements for working with students for credit. Normally, students will complete 400 hours for an internship and 150 hours for a practicum over a 10-to-15-week period. Therefore, you must ensure that you have sufficient work to satisfy a student's need of experience for credit.

You must make it clear to any candidate you hire that most weddings will take place on Saturdays; therefore, your assistant must be available on Fridays for a rehearsal, on the wedding day itself, and possibly also on Sunday. If your candidate cannot manage weekend work, you'll have to continue your search. See Table 9.2 below for further skills required of assistants.

Pay and Non-Competing Clauses

Some assistants will be willing to work to gain experience; however, you should be prepared to pay your assistants for their time and effort. Experienced assistants can earn up to \$25 an hour or even more in some cases, especially in large cities. You can always negotiate a flat fee if paying on an hourly basis does not suit your needs and budget. Something like £100 for the entire wedding would be a reasonable option, depending on what duties your assistant will perform. Seek advice from your tax advisor regarding appropriate document payment for short-term assistance. Consultants often hire the same assistants repeatedly. This is ideal because, over time, the same assistant will develop a feel for your needs and expectations even before you ask them. Sometimes, two or three wedding planners will share the same assistant. If you work with the same assistant for a long time, or take on an intern, or, most importantly, when you hire your first associate, you must have a non-competition clause as part of the arrangement. This is very important.

Many wedding consultants hesitate to hire an intern for fear that he/she might work with them for 14 weeks and then move on and open their own business using all the secrets and information they have learned. Successful wedding consultants have taken years to establish a workable system and are justifiably protective of their methods and materials. A non-competition clause in an employment statement is a condition of employment that indicates a timeframe during which the assistant, upon leaving the company, must not work for a competing entity. This is used to prevent former employees from leaking trade secrets to a competitor or starting a similar type of business. The clause might state, for example, that an employee is not permitted to work for a competing consulting firm or start a wedding consulting business within 18 months of leaving the position.

Non-competition clauses’ determination and enforcement are governed by state law; hence, it is advisable to consult a lawyer when drawing up this document. A potential employee/assistant who refuses to sign should not be hired. If he/she violates the clause, the former employee and his/her new company could be sued.

The non-competition clause might also include a radius clause. This indicates an exclusive region to which the agreement applies. The radius clause might state that employees are not permitted to start a wedding planning business or work for a competing business within 18 months of leaving their position if the new business is located within a 200-mile radius. A former employee may start his/her own business immediately only if it is located outside the specified radius.

Skills to Look for When Interviewing Assistants
Table 9.2

☐	Able to follow instructions	☐
☐	Composure under stress	☐
☐	Politeness	☐
☐	Attention to detail	☐
☐	Does not gossip	☐
☐	Maintains a professional demeanor	☐
☐	Bright personality	☐
☐	Effective multitasker	☐
☐	Well-organized	☐
☐	High energy levels	☐
☐	Can stand on his/her feet for long periods	☐
☐	Common sense	☐
☐	Self-confidence	☐
☐	Looks comfortable	☐
☐	Quick and creative problem solver	☐

Competition, Obligations and Ethics

Competition is useful up to a certain point but no further. Co-operation is what we must really strive for, and it begins where competition ends.

It is no longer a luxury to hire a wedding planner and the practice is not reserved purely for the rich and famous. Consultants are now hired by people with various budgets to manage various aspects of their wedding day.

In this section we discuss the increasing demand for wedding planners/consultants which has created a greater level of competition. We will also discuss the obligations and the ethical practices that make a successful wedding consultant.

Demand and Competition

There is significant competition between consultants who specialise in the same type of wedding. For example, if a bride needs a planner who specialises in Jewish weddings, she will interview planners in the area who offer that particular focus. The bride you meet today could interview your competition tomorrow. When there is a high-budget or high-profile wedding, planners will put forth their best efforts to land that prominent client.

This competition benefits the wedding profession in general because it encourages consultants to continually raise the bar in terms of practices and standards. Competition will keep planners/consultants up to date and sharp, and it will impel them to constantly be on the lookout for new ideas and trends. It inspires them to create something unique for each client. Some competition also encourages continuous education through workshops, classes and seminars. Wedding consultancy is a business and, like any business, the people involved must constantly study their market and hone their skills to remain on top. Competition has taken ugly turns in the past and has led to questionable actions being taken. We continually emphasise the need for ethical, respectful, and trustworthy interactions with vendors, clients and other consultants. Dishonest or antagonistic practices might help a consultant in the short run, but word eventually gets out and vendors and clients alike will turn away from such a planner.

Obligations

Your obligations as a wedding planning professional are important and include obligations to vendors, clients, your own business, the wedding profession, and, of course, yourself and the people in your social network. You will have to manage all the responsibilities that compete for your time and you must do so with finesse and grace. As a consultant/planner, your main business obligation is to your clients, usually the bride. If you have been hired by the bride's parents, you have obligations to them as well. As a rule of thumb, if the bride is happy, then everyone around her will be happy. Your job is to make the bride happy, and this will sometimes mean that you have to negotiate with vendors to ensure the bride's satisfaction. Let's say that a bride has chosen a historic Federal-style hotel for her wedding reception in late November. The hotel has a beautiful staircase which leads to the front door. It has always been the bride's dream to be photographed outside on the staircase. On the actual wedding day, the photographer tells you he prefers not to take any photographs outside as it is too cold. Your diplomatic skills will come into play now; your obligations to your client will rely on them. You must tell the photographer tactfully that the bride still wants to be photographed outside on the staircase despite the cold as it has long been her dream and, therefore, this photo is not negotiable. You might then tell the photographer that you'll have hot coffee/chocolate sent out to everyone to keep them warm.

Wedding planners/consultants also have obligations to their vendors; therefore, in the above example, you will have to accommodate both the photographer's wishes and the bride's desires. This is sometimes a balancing act but, if you have to choose, the bride's needs must almost always come first. Be careful,

however. If you treat your vendors poorly and annoy them, they may refuse to work with you again. Treat all vendors with courtesy and respect, and they will continue to recommend you.

As discussed earlier in this course, you must also feed your vendors. No-one works well on an empty stomach. When you determine the final headcount for the catering, remind the clients to include the vendors' meals in the total number. Your responsibility will be to ensure that your clients fully understand the importance of feeding vendors, including yourself and any assistants you may have. It is also up to you to tell the vendors when their meals are ready and where they can take a break to eat. Well-fed staff are very productive staff.

Planners/consultants must also ensure that vendors are given water and other hot or cold beverages while setting up. If a tent is being installed in August in 30-degree heat, the staff members will surely appreciate you and recommend you to others if you provide them with ice-cold beverages. The same holds true in the winter. Installing floral arrangements or moving in catering equipment outdoors can be difficult in the cold. Ensure you have hot tea and coffee on hand. This small courtesy will go a long way to getting the job done on time.

As well as their obligations to clients and vendors, wedding planners/consultants have obligations to the wedding profession itself. Since wedding consulting/planning is a relatively new type of career, consultants must give back to their profession to help all facets of it to advance.

Your obligations to your own business, to yourself, and to those closest to you are the most important. When you have your own business, it is up to you to make sure your company succeeds. Daily decisions will form part of that success. One of the most important policies to maintain is to always collect final payment at least two weeks before the wedding day.

Once a wedding has taken place and your services have been provided and are no longer needed, it is almost impossible to collect money owing without legal assistance. Instead of learning this fact the hard way, always collect final payment well in advance of the actual wedding. You will then have enough time to ensure that any cheques have cleared. If a problem occurs, such as insufficient funds being available, you will have leverage in terms of refusing to manage the wedding on the day. Most couples don't intentionally decide to defraud their wedding planners, but as their wedding approaches they face a lot more financial pressures and perhaps begin to search for a way out of making any final payments. It is ultimately up to you to make sure you are paid for your services.

You will also have other obligations to yourself, including balancing your personal life and your career. There are numerous ways of managing stress associated with wedding planning as a career. Top planners understand that the more clients pay for your services, the more they will expect from you. This includes understanding that your personal problems or crises are not your clients' and your clients expect to come first.

Ethics

It can be easy to assume that, in the business world, bad behaviour is rewarded, especially if you look at cases such as Enron, Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, and World-Com. The fact remains, however, that a documented connection exists between solid morals and business success (Lennick and Kiel,

2005). This is why you must become a business owner with very clear ethical principles right from the beginning. From the first day you open for business, you must lead by example and you must show others that you are fair, honest, responsible, just and compassionate.

For example, imagine that you have back-to-back appointments with two prospective clients who are considering your services. The first bride, Marla, asks about your fees for the comprehensive planning services. You tell her they are \$3,000. Later on, the second bride, Jane, asks the same question. You see that Jane is wearing an expensive designer outfit and has a 5-carat diamond engagement ring. You quote her \$5,000 as your comprehensive planning fee. Both of the weddings will need the same amount of work on your part, but you have quoted them two different fees based on what you *think* each bride can afford. Imagine now that these two brides happen to be friends. The consequences for you and your business will be considerable. They will discuss their individual meetings with you and compare notes. Your inconsistency in pricing will be exposed and you will lose credibility. Neither client will then hire you to plan her wedding.

When discussing your fees with potential clients, you must always be consistent in your pricing structures despite what you believe a client can afford. If you prefer a more flexible price structure, set your fees as a percentage of the overall wedding budget. This will ensure consistent application and will address the fact that a \$90,000 wedding is likely to be more labour-intensive than a \$25,000 wedding. Do not randomly mention fees based on appearances. You will seem disorganised, especially if you're unable to remember the amount you originally quoted later on. The fee structure you utilise should not have any ambiguity whatsoever. David Fletcher, an entertainment specialist, offers this wisdom regarding honesty in the wedding profession: "I'm a truthful person, not because I'm a good person, but because it is easier to remember." The truth is that it's much harder to remember a series of lies than it is to engage in honest practices.

Another ethical issue is that of kickbacks. For example, a wedding planner, Chris, always takes his clients to meet the same florist regardless of each couple's floral vision. It makes no difference whether a couple want contemporary, romantic, English garden, Asian-influenced, or herb-inspired wedding flowers; Chris will take them to "Laney's Florist" because Chris and Laney are good friends and Laney will give Chris a certain percentage of the total order placed by any client he brings. This practice does a disservice to both clients and the wedding planning profession. An ethical approach would involve listening to the clients' needs, directing them to a few carefully chosen florists, and letting them make the final decision themselves. If, after doing a lot of business with a particular vendor, he/she decides to give you a discount, it is only fair to pass this on to your clients. After all, the couple has hired you in the hope that, through your contacts and expertise, you will be able to save them some money. This would be the perfect opportunity to show clients what a great investment it was for them to hire you as a consultant.

Some consultants go as far as asking vendors what kind of deals they will offer. A consultant, for example, might approach a caterer and say, "I'll refer you to my bride. How much will you pay me to do that?" The use of kickbacks has created a huge divide in the wedding profession between planners who do and planners who don't engage in this practice. Most consultants and vendors will avoid kickbacks for three main reasons. Firstly, a consultant's vendor recommendations are based on who will kick back the

most and has nothing to do with what will ultimately be best for the couple. Secondly, vendors will increase the price in order to cover the kickback amount and this will cause an artificial inflation of the price of goods and services. Thirdly, regardless of the amount of money, kickbacks always encourage consultants and vendors to develop dishonest relationships with their clients.

Ethics also relate to any private information your clients share with you. Working with a couple on their forthcoming wedding will make you privy to all kinds of information about the bride, the groom, and their families. You have a responsibility to treat all information with the utmost discretion. What you are told in confidence should remain between you and your client. Imagine the consequences if comments such as “I’m not really crazy about my new mother-in-law,” “Keep Uncle Bob away from the booze,” or “I just hope my boss doesn’t speak to any other guests at the wedding” became public. As the pressure of the wedding begins to build, the couple and other family members may let off steam by telling you how they feel. A good wedding consultant will listen with empathy and keep clients’ secrets forever.

Sometimes at the reception, guests might come over to you and strike up a conversation. It usually starts with an innocent compliment about the wedding. They might then slyly ask you how much your clients have spent on certain items. The conversation might perhaps continue something like this:

Guest: This dessert was a great idea. I’ve never seen such an extravagant chocolate fountain before. And the flowers - magnificent. The Smith family have really outdone themselves with this reception tonight. How much do you reckon an event like this would cost?

Wedding Consultant: I couldn’t agree with you more. The décor and the special touches are just fabulous. In fact, this is one of the most spectacular weddings I’ve ever managed. As for the cost, that’s between me and my clients.

Keeping your clients’ secrets is a quality that every consultant/planner must possess. This skill will definitely serve you well.

Finally, a responsible consultant will think of those in the community and make a point of giving back when possible. For example, any floral arrangements that clients don’t want and that are not taken by the guests might be delivered to the local hospital to bring cheer to those in need. Small gestures like this will make the world a better place and you a better wedding consultant.

Stress Management and Career Enrichment

Despite not being as stressful a job as that of an air traffic controller, wedding consulting is really not for the faint-hearted. It is stressful with demanding clients and, indeed, little margin for error. To be successful, a top wedding planner should be a diplomat, a counsellor, a cheerleader, a good negotiator, and a sponge. A sponge? Yes, you read right. As a consultant or planner, you have to be part sponge because you are the one who will have to absorb the wedding stress and pressure and take it off the couple. It is the planner’s job to worry over all the details in order that the couple might actually enjoy their wedding day. If, for example, the officiant has a cold, the cake hasn’t arrived, or the maid of honour is missing, it is you, the planner, who must worry while the bride and groom are blissfully unaware of these potential disasters.

In this section we will discuss some stress management tips that will help you stay calm and energised. We will also discuss career enrichment techniques. They will be highlighted and designed to keep you feeling fresh and to keep you moving forward.

Stress Management Tips

Wedding consultants will often be in pressure-packed situations and will therefore have to learn to manage stress effectively. Imagine what stress might occur during an upscale wedding reception if two tables of guests demand to be moved because they find the band too loud. A consultant who is easily flustered may fly off the handle. He/she may tell these guests to sit there and deal with it. This type of flippant response will probably anger the guests and perhaps even encourage them to take matters into their own hands. Anarchy among the wedding guests is something to be avoided. A planner who is calm and composed will leap into action and resolve the issue with the least amount of disruption possible to both the couple and the guests. Issues will often arise at weddings, but if you stay calm and are able to think on your feet, you'll be able to handle anything that comes your way. A planner's job is to deflect wedding stress from the couple, but who will help you manage your daily pressures? As an independent consultant, you must recognise the stressful nature of your job and take all appropriate steps to reduce this stress in your life.

One way of reducing anxiety is to know all the details of a wedding inside out. The more aware you are of all the details, the less stressed and nervous you will be. Ask yourself whether you have confirmed arrangements with all the vendors. Do you have copies of all the contracts? Have you completed the seating arrangements? Have you considered event security? Do you have a Plan B in the case of unexpected weather? Have you checked with the couple to find out whether there have been any last-minute changes? If you carefully plan your work and effectively work your plan by organising and confirming every element prior to the wedding, your stress levels will be lessened and you will feel more confident that everything is well under control.

A well-structured approach will allow you to concentrate on the execution of the wedding instead of being overwhelmed by any issue that may have been neglected. This does not mean that unexpected emergencies won't arise, but knowing that all the essentials have been covered will allow you the flexibility to hand some responsibilities over to assistants if you have to troubleshoot. Another way of reducing stress is to recommend vendors that you know you can trust based on successful past experiences. These vendors must have a reputation for excellent service, stellar professionalism and, of course, punctuality. Every vendor recommendation will reflect back on you and your business. You will feel calm when you know with absolute certainty that a recommended vendor will be the perfect fit for a couple and can be trusted to deliver on the wedding day. Will your recommended florist drive through snowstorms to deliver the flowers to a wedding? Will your caterer go to the trouble of finding authentic sake cups for your Japanese clients? Will the tent company you use search everywhere to find the exact shade of green that the clients require for their tent liners? After you've worked on and plan more weddings, you will get to know which vendors are trustworthy and dependable. Surround yourself with a team of reliable, dedicated and knowledgeable professionals. This will greatly reduce your stress levels and your job will become easier.

Even if you have done months of careful planning, using top vendors, you cannot completely escape the day-of-the-wedding stress. No matter how long you’ve been in business or how many weddings you’ve worked on, most consultants/planners feel some degree of stress on each client’s wedding day. This is natural. In your heart, however, you must know that you’ve done everything to prepare for the wedding and that everything will go smoothly. Still, make sure you learn and apply stress management skills as mentioned earlier. Perkins (2003) gives a series of valuable stress busters which are adapted to specifically apply to wedding planners. Please see Table 9.3 below.

Stressful situations of all kinds occur daily but it is the way you handle them that often determines how out of control they become. Do not make mountains out of molehills. For example, imagine that you are checking on preparations for a reception at 6 pm. You walk into the ballroom of a fancy, downtown hotel to find that the DJ has set up his equipment where the couple’s buffet table should be. By making sure you are prepared and by catching this mistake early enough, you can remedy the situation quickly and make use of your sense of humour. Instead of making a disparaging comment, you might joke with the DJ that he is supposed to *improve* the dining experience, not *be* the dining experience.

By working on some stress-buster techniques each day, you will reduce your need to snap at vendors and clients. Remember that the bride and groom will watch you. If you are stressed, they will also be stressed, but if you project a sense of calm, the couple will see and feel this and they will be able to relax. Every wedding consultant has his/her different ways of reducing stress. There are no guaranteed universal relaxation strategies.

One consultant may get up at 5 am and take a power walk, no matter what the weather. Another consultant takes the time each week to have a pedicure. She gets a kick out of having her toes painted in funky styles and colours and she uses this as a conversation starter during her events. Again, another planner refinishes furniture from garage sales as stress reduction. Whatever interest or hobby you enjoy, pursue it. It will make you a much happier person.

Table 9.3

Wedding Consultant Stress-Busters

Learn to say no. Building a business from scratch is challenging. While establishing your own business, do not be afraid to say no to requests such as babysitting for your friend, helping a relative research the family tree, or rewriting the bylaws for your local volunteer organisation. Give yourself permission to say no to requests that do not further your new business, especially during the busiest times.
Do not overdo it. If you require eight hours of sleep to function at your best, do not pull a series of all-nighters just before your first wedding. No one will thank you for it. It is your ability to think on your feet and manage the wedding that counts. If you are operating at half-speed, your business and clients will suffer.
Take breaks. If you work from home, do not chain yourself to the computer or phone for 12 hours solid. Take breaks. Go to the gym or listen to some music. This way you will return to work feeling fresh and with a clearer perspective.

- Pace yourself. Break your tasks down into better, manageable steps. Make sure you give yourself enough time to meet deadlines. If you have a big task such as assigning the seating for 300 people, break the job down into three or four smaller steps. This way you will not be so overwhelmed.
- Plan ahead to rest. Schedule resting periods after certain events you know will drain you. Do not schedule a meeting with a potential client the morning after a big wedding. Allow yourself the time to catch your breath.
- Give yourself time for a relaxing bath without interruptions. Do not answer the phone. Fill the tub, light a candle, and relax while reading a magazine or the latest book by your favourite author.
- Listen to music. Music is an excellent way to cut through the tedium and stress of day-to-day details. Listening to your favourite music can help you relax and put you in a good mood.
- Get out more. Break up your day by scheduling a site visit to meet with a vendor who is located at or near the beach, a lake, the zoo, or a park. After the meeting you could stroll around and have a quiet moment for yourself.
- Take part in activities that are meaningful to you. Many new wedding consultants say that they don't have a life, since they always work on weekends. Find an activity or club that organises gatherings during the week or plan an evening get-together with friends for dinner and a movie. Don't let your business take this away from you. You will need to keep as much fun and joy in your life as possible.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet. Planners running on caffeine and sugar will be edgy and lack the stamina needed for day-of execution.
- Develop insight. Yoga, deep breathing, meditation and prayer are ways to connect with what is meaningful for you. Engage in activities that are the most soothing to you.
- Exercise. This provides stress release and also burns calories.
- Vent. If you feel excited or angry about something, talk it over with a family member or close friend, or perhaps another trusted consultant. It will help you feel better.
- Take a nap. If time permits, have a 20-minute power nap. It will revive you and help calm your nerves for the tasks ahead.
- Retain your sense of humour. Take the time to laugh. Humour is good for the spirit. Every wedding will have its ridiculous moments. If you can see humour in the craziness, you are well on your way to successfully managing the situation.

Career Enrichment

As well as managing your stress levels, as a wedding planner you should seek opportunities to enrich your career. Don't wait until you become bored with managing the same type of wedding again and again. Sign up for a calligraphy class or floral design class and learn something new. Perhaps attend a seminar by a leading catering expert. By attending classes and workshops, planners from around the globe can learn about new products and ideas and start incorporating them into the weddings they plan.

You really don't want to hear a guest at a wedding say, "This must have been planned by (insert your company name). They always use tuxedo strawberries arranged around the cake." Clients must never think that their wedding will be exactly the same as the last six or seven weddings you planned. Clients always want something individual, different and new. The ability to offer and display the unexpected will keep you in demand.

Another way of enhancing your wedding planning career is to incorporate travel. There has been a huge increase in the number of multicultural couples and it is especially helpful to clients if you have travelled and experienced different cultures. If you've been to Asia and travelled extensively, you will be better informed and able to plan a wedding for a Korean bride and a Japanese groom. You might also read about Asian customs and solicit advice, but there's nothing like experiencing things for yourself as this opens your eyes and gives you cultural insight.

Career Shift

Once you have become a successful, independent wedding consultant, you may find you become tired of the business. You may begin dreaming of a day when you don't have to get up and leave the house at the crack of dawn or go off to work on a beautiful Saturday afternoon. Remember this however: your career as an independent wedding consultant/planner has advantages. You can accept as many or as few jobs as your time and budget will allow. Perhaps you want to take August off and just relax. You can do this. You control your schedule. It can be tiring planning perfect weddings week after week. Experienced planners often move their businesses in different directions, perhaps with less stress and also more manageable hours. This would be referred to as a **Career Shift**. When you first start out in the wedding planning business, you may think that this is the only thing you want to do for the rest of your life. The good news is that you can. Alternatively, you might decide to take your business in a different direction.

Many consultants retain their planning businesses while exploring other opportunities. These are often related to the wedding business. Laura Weatherly, a top Washington DC planner/consultant, is also writing mystery novels as well as planning weddings. Her debut novel was *Better off Wed* and there is also a sequel entitled *For Better or Hearse*. They are exciting whodunit novels and the main character is a supersleuth wedding planner. The victims are a horrid mother of the bride and a snooty hotel chef. Another consultant, Wendy Joblon from Massachusetts, is a sought-after professional who has also opened her own stationery and invitation boutique, and her clients couldn't be happier. Yet another wedding planner, Joyce Scardina Becker, teaches a wedding consultant certificate program at California State University, Hayward, as well as running her wedding planning business.

Celebrity wedding consultants do the same. Colin Cowie, for example, has written books on wedding and entertainment and also has a home décor line with JCPenney. Preston Bailey has written several books and has now partnered with Sandals Resorts to create his signature WeddingMoons, and Sharon Sacks has her own clothing line, leather goods, and make-up business (Muhlke, 2005).

Whether you plan three weddings a year or you have a team that plans three hundred a year, a career as a wedding planner/consultant is rewarding, meaningful and challenging. You have the privilege of

working with people as they prepare for one of the most important events of their lives. It is your hard work that makes their wedding day special and provides memories of their commitment. Couples can enjoy their special day without stress.

Whether you strive for a career in wedding planning or you long for your own perfect wedding, our sincere hope is that this course has inspired you to think about the cultural significance of weddings and the particulars of the wedding profession. These are exciting times for wedding planners/consultants. There are popular trends such as destination weddings, changing families, many more multicultural traditions, and the legalisation of same-sex unions. All of these broaden the scope and the visibility of this particular career. Now, perhaps more than ever, the wedding profession needs consultants who respect and understand today's diverse clientele and who can transform their needs into remarkable weddings.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *How to Start a Wedding Planning Business, (2005), By Sherrie Wilkolaski*
- ✓ *How to Start a Home-Based Wedding Planning Business, (2009), By Jill S. Moran*